A Two-dimensional Classification Framework for Service-Learning

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1. ABSTRACT

This paper presents a framework to relate and quantify two aspects of service-learning projects that are often in tension with each other. When students are brought to work in the community as part of an intentional learning experience, there is often a trade-off between the amounts of useful, impactful service that they can provide, versus the social learning that they can attain through executing these projects. Furco (1996) proposed a continuum that relates community service, service learning, field education and internships, but it is often not easy to decide where one begins and the other ends. This framework is therefore an attempt to more clearly delineate the different modes of engaged learning.

Key Words: service vs. learning, framework

2. INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning has become extremely popular in education, both at K-12 and higher education level, as institutions struggle to prepare students for a rapidly changing, complex world. Among the many modes of experiential education, community service, service-learning and community-based learning have attracted much attention for their ability to put students in touch with the community, to build social responsibility and empathy, and to practice principles and theories in a real-world setting.

Sigmon (1994) was one of the first to propose a precise definition of service-learning by using a typology to characterise the relative emphases given to the “service” and “learning” aspects of service-learning and how they are connected to each other. The definition of service-learning, in that definition, is an activity where the "service and learning goals are of equal weight, and each enhances the other for all participants".

Furco (1996) proposed a model that relates service-learning to the similar learning activities of volunteerism, community service, field education and internships on a continuum defined by the beneficiary (recipient vs provider) and the focus (service vs learning) of the activity. Volunteerism, for example, would be heavily focused on the service, and the beneficiaries would overwhelmingly be targeted at the recipient. Internships, on the other hand, might be mostly focused on the learning, and the intended beneficiary would most likely be the provider. This model is helpful for classifying the various types of community-based experiential activities, but it is not easy to delineate where one ends and the other begins.

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Ngai and Chan (2015), in contrast, use a model that classifies individual activities, rather than categories of activities, mainly focusing on computer science-related projects that are executed overseas. They articulate 5 questions to be asked, 2 about the recipients, 2 about the providers, and 1 about both. The questions focus on different chronological periods of the service: the preparation, execution, and follow-up. While their questions are useful as a guideline when designing a service project, the nature of the model does not make it easy to compare different projects with each other.

3. A 2-DIMENSIONAL SPACE OF SOCIAL LEARNING AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

This paper borrows from both works to create a framework that is intended to allow one to visualize and compare different projects in a 2-dimensional plane defined by two orthogonal axes.

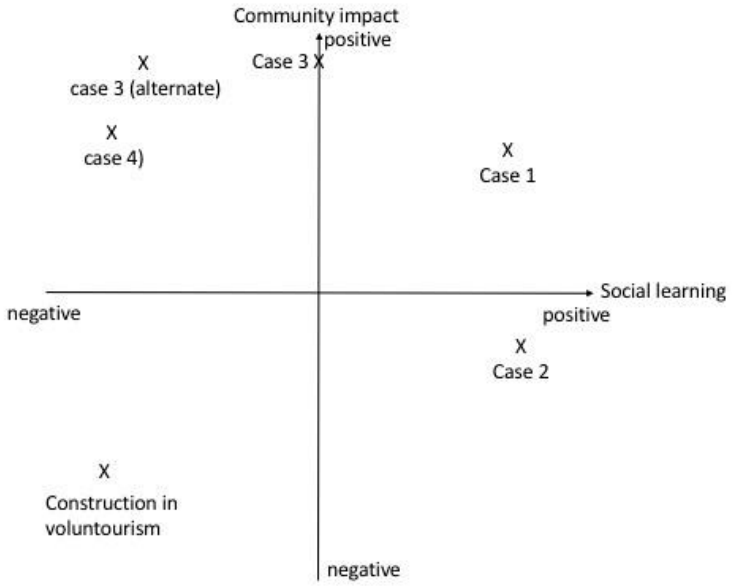

Figure 1

The "social learning" axis is an intersection between Furco's "Beneficiary" continuum with Ngai and Chan's "Students" aspect. It refers to both concepts that are generally associated with service-learning, such as social responsibility and ethics, as well as academic concepts and theories on society and privilege. Some of these topics may be intimately related to a particular academic discipline but yet distinct from concepts that are typically covered in that field. For example, a Computer Science student could expect to learn about algorithms, mathematics, databases, web programming, etc as a direct consequence of his/her own major of study, while concepts such as the digital divide, appropriate technology, and computer-aided learning are much less likely to be covered outside of a service-learning course. Taking an example from another discipline (Nursing), students might expect to learn about anatomy, physiology and nutrition, but they would probably not expect to learn about the supply (or lack thereof) of unprocessed, balanced foodstuffs in low-income areas.

The "community impact" axis combines Furco's "Focus" continuum with Ngai and Chan's "Community" aspect. Impact can be both tangible as well as intangible. An example of a tangible impact could be the setting up of a computer cafe or a library in an

impoverished community. An intangible impact could be mental or educational. For example, the co-design and co-creation of creative outfits with individuals recovering from mental illness does not give the recipient any tangible benefit, but the process of creative design and fabrication is in and of itself therapeutic and benefits the recipient's recovery.

It is important to note that both social learning and community impact can be positive or negative, even by design, even though it may not be the intention. The definition of impact is measured as the contribution that could be achieved without the input of the provider. Take, for example, the many "voluntourism" projects that bring participants to developing nations, without training or preparation, to build houses. The participants feel good and sense that they are doing something meaningful — however, without proper training, and not being from the construction profession, oftentimes they are limited to doing work that could easily, or even more effectively, done by local people; and the quality of the work is poor due to the lack of skills. In that sense, the project could even be seen as taking job opportunities away from the community, with inferior output.

By the same token, social learning can also be negative. For example, in the aforementioned project, bringing participants into the community to work without proper training belittles the complexity of the task. Worst yet, it may cause the participants to under-estimate the needs of the community, and to form mistaken ideas about the context, the recipients or the community, notions such as "the tasks are easier than other presented them", "if it is this simple, why can't they do it themselves", thus reinforcing the very stereotypes about poverty and privilege that service-learning seeks to tear down.

4. CASE STUDIES

We will validate our framework with 4 examples of service-learning projects. These projects are taken from actual cases that were submitted for approval at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University's subcommittee on service-learning subjects.

Case 1: Designing Fashions with Formerly Mentally-Ill Patients

In this project, participants (students) work with individuals who have suffered from mental illness to co-design and fabricate an outfit from scratch. The resulting outfits are worn in a fashion show by the beneficiaries and also put on display in an exhibit.

This project brings much positive social learning gains and community impact. Creativity and crafts have been shown to be very effective as means of relieving stress or even therapy; the final activity of the fashion show and exhibit also encourages the beneficiaries to interact with the general public, and informs the general public about the realities of mental illness. The students learn about the stigma and the associated challenges faced by mentally-ill individuals, even those who have recovered, and interact and collaborate with them on a project that requires the input of all sides.

This case falls into Quadrant 1. It was also readily approved as a service-learning project.

Case 2: Helping out with farm-work in farms in poor rural areas

In this case, students first learn about poverty and the causes of rural and intergenerational poverty in the classroom. They then participate in a project that brings them to a rural area in a developing nation where they meet families who live under the poverty line, and experience their hardships through helping out with farm-work.

This project, while undoubtedly bringing a lot of learning gains for the students and a great immersive learning experience, arguably brings very little to the beneficiaries. University students are not likely to be well-versed at manual labor, much less farm-work, therefore their contribution to the family is likely to be very little. It is true that the beneficiaries get some encouragement from having outside visitors come and visit, but this is too unintentional and too peripheral to be counted as having a real impact.

This case thus falls into Quadrant 4, with positive gains on the social learning axis, but little community impact.

Having said that, it is not to say that all activities of this kind must be avoided. As part of a larger, more intentionally-designed service experience, it can motivate participants to work more effectively and with greater empathy.

Case 3: Building a webpage for an NGO

This is an often-requested service that, on the surface, appears to be well-founded. Students who are studying computer science practice their skills building webpages cheaply for a non-profit.

We would argue that this project, while positive in terms of impact (it is providing a much-needed service which in the commercial world can be quite costly), contributes almost nothing in terms of social learning. Building a webpage for an NGO is, by and large, very similar to building a webpage for a profit-making enterprise, with the exception that some of the content may be about the underprivileged rather than about profit-making or products. It is true that this project gives students valuable practice in classroom-learned concepts (such as user interface design, software engineering and databases), but these concepts are not necessarily related to social issues.

In this case, the project would fall on the vertical axis between Quadrants 1 and 2.

It is also possible that this project could result in negative learning gains for students. Compared with enterprises, NGOs are usually underfunded, with overworked employees who are often responsible for multiple aspects of the organization, some of which they may not even be trained for! For an average student, working in these contexts can lead to frustration as user requirements keep on changing ("they don't know what they want!") and panic as the organization seems to make "impossible" demands ("feature creep" is commonplace even in the corporate environment with professionals on both sides of the negotiation table, it is worse in contexts in which the "customer" is not knowledgeable about the limitations of the computer.) This can well turn into a very negative experience on the students' side.

Therefore, in the worst case, this project could easily fall into Quadrant 2.

Case 4: Refurbishing used computers for distribution to needy individuals

This is another very commonly-seen "voluntourism" project that, on the surface, appears to be well-founded. Given the rapid upgrading cycle of information technology, many computers (desktops and laptops) are discarded by companies and individuals while they are still good. Can these computers be refurbished for distribution to needy individuals?

We would argue that this is a project that, while positive in terms of impact (needy individuals get computers), contributes nothing or is potentially negative from the social learning viewpoint. Refurbishing used computers is a tedious task which does not give the participants any interaction with the underprivileged, and, as such, is unlikely to arouse a sense of social responsibility beyond an abstract sense of waste. (Taken wrongly, it could also be used to justify unnecessary upgrades in computer equipment.) Even from the engineering/computer science aspect, it is unlikely to contribute much learning, as most computer components are obsoleted so quickly that it is unlikely that skills learned in refurbishing an old computer are likely to be of much use for newer models.

This project would be placed in Quadrant 2.

5. CONCLUSION

We have proposed a framework for comparing and visualising different forms of service- and community-based experiential learning, and demonstrated its use through several different case studies. This framework is developed based on the experiences in designing and teaching SL since 2006. The framework has been tested against the decisions of a committee which examined 100+ proposals for SL subjects since 2011. The proposals that were approved by the committee are generally placed in the first quadrant of the framework. Hence the framework is consistent with the decisions of at least one set of teachers experienced in SL. In future work, we will further validate the framework through analysis with participant and community data.

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